

**ARABIA HAERESIVM FERAX  
(ARABIA BEARER OF HERESIES):**

**Schismatic Christianity's Potential Influence on Muhammad and the Qur'an**

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For Eastern Christendom, Arabia was the region of exile for heretical doctrines and schismatic Christian groups. This same Arabia saw the rise of Muhammad and the Qur'an in the seventh century. As Samir Khalil Samir relates, "There is no need to demonstrate that there was a Christian influence on the Qur'ān, in as much as this is apparent from the evidence of a number of narratives."<sup>1</sup> Yet, the Qur'an's understanding of Christology is in conflict with orthodox Christian beliefs. In one instance, the Qur'an views Christianity as teaching modalism, assuming that Jesus comprised the entire Godhead (sura 5:72), while the next verse describes Christians as tritheists, assigning Jesus to one of three gods (v.73). The same sura contends that the Christian Trinity consists of God, Jesus, and Mary (v.116).<sup>2</sup> In the historical context of seventh century Arabia, it is important to recognize the impact of Christian sects on differing cultures and religions. The purpose of this article is to determine the extent, if any, of schismatic Christian influences on the Qur'an's misunderstanding about the nature of Christ. It will identify the dissonant Christian groups present in Arabia at the time of Muhammad, as well as discuss their Christological views, the probability of Muhammad's contact with them, and the likelihood that Muhammad borrowed from these groups in creating the Qur'anic view of Jesus. In the end, it is probable that the Qur'an partially, though not consistently, reflects some of the competing Christologies among Christian schismatics in Arabia at the time of Muhammad.

**Qur'anic Christology**

Sidney Griffith explains that it is likely Muhammad viewed all Christian denominations, Orthodox and schismatic, as possessing the same Christology because of their agreement in most other theological discussions.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Samir concludes that the Qur'an takes Christological themes and juxtaposes them with Islamic dogma. Muhammad's "principle of coherence" required assimilating parallel stories to give them a new Islamic meaning.<sup>4</sup> Thus, while Qur'anic Christology is similar to some aspects of Orthodox Christian belief, it has a distinct flavor that is tailored to the Arab-Muslim milieu. Writing in the eighth century, John of Damascus (AD 675-753) eloquently summarized Muhammad's Christology as presented in the Qur'an:

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<sup>1</sup> Samir Khalil Samir, "The Theological Christian Influence on the Qur'ān: A Reflection," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 161. See, also, p. 160 for a discussion on schismatic exile in Arabia and pp. 152-61 for examples of Christian theological and philological influence.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all allusions and quotations of the Qur'an are from M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A New Translation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Sidney Griffith, "'Melkites', 'Jacobites' and the Christological Controversies in Arabic in Third/Ninth-Century Syria," in *Syrian Christians Under Islam: The First Thousand Years*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 54-55.

<sup>4</sup> Samir, 152-160.

He says that Christ is the Word of God [3:45] and His Spirit [4:171], created [3:59], and a servant [4:172], born from Mary [5:110], the sister of Moses and Aaron [19:28] without seed [19:20], because the Word of God entered Mary [21:91] and she gave birth to Jesus, a prophet [3:39] and a servant of God, and that the Jews, violating the law wanted to crucify him [3:54] and they seized him, but they crucified his shadow, and Christ himself was not crucified, they say, nor did he die [4:157]; God took him up to heaven unto Himself [3:55; 4:158] because He loved him. And he says that when he ascended into heaven God asked him, 'Jesus did you say that "I am Son of God, and God"?' And Jesus answered, 'Be merciful to me, O Lord; you know that I did not say so, neither shall I boast that I am your servant, but men who have gone astray wrote that I said this thing, and they spoke lies against me, and they are in error.' [5:116].<sup>5</sup>

### Muhammad's Encounters With Christian Schismatics

Because Muhammad had an entirely different Christology from the biblical Jesus, it is important to consider the amount of influence heterodox Christians had on Muhammad. John Trimmingham and Griffith conclude that there were three dominant Christian groups in contact with pre-Islamic Arabs: Oriental (Syrian) Orthodox, Monophysites, and Nestorians.<sup>6</sup> The majority of Syriac and Arabic-speaking Christians in the Arabian region, including monks and clergy members, were Monophysite.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Robert Betts explains that the Nestorians were the second largest group to impact the Arabs.<sup>8</sup> In fact, the Arab Ghassānid tribe was entirely Monophysite while the Lakhmid tribe was Nestorian.<sup>9</sup> The presenting problem is whether Muhammad had contact with these groups and learned from their differing Christologies.

### Challenges to Muhammad's Knowledge of Differing Sects

Despite the Qur'an's claim to believe in Christian revelation (29:46), Muslim and non-Muslim historians agree that Muhammad did not have access to Christian literature.<sup>10</sup> For Richard Bell, this means that Muhammad likely did not possess an intimate knowledge of any particular sect's Christology. Instead, he gathered most of his convictions from schismatic retellings of biblical narratives and characters. Muhammad merely collected whatever information he could assemble, oftentimes from third and fourth-hand sources. As time passed, Muhammad discovered more Christological teachings that he either accepted or

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Daniel J. Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam: The "Heresy of the Ishmaelites"* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1972), 78.

<sup>6</sup> John Spencer Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman Group Limited, 1979), 159; Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Trimmingham, 167.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Brenton Betts, *Christians in the Arab East: A Political Study*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 3.

<sup>9</sup> See Sidney Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an: The 'Companions of the Cave' in *Sūrat al-Kahf* and in Syriac Christian Tradition," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel Said Reynolds (London: Routledge, 2008), 121.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Muhammad Farooq-i-Azam Malik, *English Translation of the Meanings of Al-Qur'an: The Guidance for Mankind* (Houston: The Institute of Islamic Knowledge, 1997), 16 and Bertold Spuler, *The Muslim World: A Historical Survey* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 1:26n1.

rejected depending on his situation. According to Bell, it was only after Muhammad fled to Medina that he had personal contact with Christians. Thus, when the Qur'an references different sects (cf. 6:159), it is likely referring to the division between Christians and Jews. Bell believes it is improbable that Muhammad knew about the Christological controversies of the time.<sup>11</sup>

David Marshall acknowledges that the Qur'an has little to say about Christians in the Meccan suras, grouping them under the title, "People of the Book." It appears that Muhammad believed Christians would endorse his prophethood before arriving in Medina. Once there, Muhammad distinguished between Jews and Christians in answer to their rejection of his prophetic claim. Nonetheless, a phenomenon appears in the Meccan suras that indicates his awareness of Christological controversies. After every significant Meccan passage referencing Jesus, the Qur'an renounces Christian factionalism (cf. 21:93; 23:53; 43:65).<sup>12</sup> These qualifying statements indicate that Muhammad had some knowledge about the different Christian sects.

Similarly, the historical context of Muhammad's membership in the Quraysh tribe leaves little doubt that Muhammad had repeated encounters with Christian schismatics throughout his life. His specific tribesmen were well-known traders to Syria and southwestern Arabia, as well as guardians of the major Meccan pilgrimage to the Ka'aba.<sup>13</sup> It is not apparent, however, whether these contacts had more than a superficial influence on his Christology. According to Griffith's research, the influence of Monophysite Christians, especially from Abyssinia, gave Muhammad a version of Jesus that he later rejected in the Qur'an. Instead of borrowing directly from Christian sources, Griffith argues that Muhammad alluded to Monophysite folklore to develop his own personal theology.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, Trimmingham states that the concept of a God-man was just too foreign for the Arabs and would not be embraced by the people.<sup>15</sup> Thus, for many scholars, the presence of Christian schismatics was not enough to influence or dominate the Christological beliefs of Islam's founder.

#### Direct Contact in Islamic Tradition

Despite these challenges, Muslim tradition discusses several major encounters between Muhammad and dissonant Christian groups. The first encounter involves a Nestorian monk who proclaimed Muhammad's prophetic ascendancy. Another encounter involves Waraqa ibn Nawfal, cousin to Muhammad's wife Khadija. According to Islamic tradition, Waraqa was a Christian scholar who copied the Gospels from their Hebrew translation. Also, during the Meccan persecution, Muhammad sent his earliest followers to Negus, an Abyssinian Monophysite king in Ethiopia. Another tradition states that Muhammad had frequent

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in Its Christian Environment*, Islam and the Muslim World Gunning Lectures 10 (London: Routledge, 1968), 100-55. See also, Marston Speight, "Christians in the *Hadith* Literature," in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd V.J. Ridgeon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 37-49.

<sup>12</sup> David Marshall, "Christianity in the Qur'an," in *Islamic Interpretations of Christianity*, ed. Lloyd V.J. Ridgeon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 8-10.

<sup>13</sup> See William Shepard, *Introducing Islam* (London: Routledge, 2009), 15, 26-27 and Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 7-12.

<sup>14</sup> Griffith, "Christian Lore and the Arabic Qur'an," 109-37.

<sup>15</sup> Trimmingham, 310-11.

discussions with an Egyptian Christian named Jabr. Muhammad's critics claimed that Jabr was responsible for Islamic teachings. Finally, Muhammad had a Coptic (Monophysite) wife named Mariya from Egypt.<sup>16</sup> Even the Qur'an alludes to encounters with foreign sources of information, "We know very well that they say, 'It is a man who teaches him,' but the language of the person they allude to is foreign" (16:103). According to these traditions, Muhammad had regular contact with schismatic Christians, especially Monophysites and Nestorians.

### The Rise of Christological Controversies

Mahmud Ayoub relates a common story by Muslim commentators that attempts to explain the rise of Christological controversies in Arabia. The legend describes a Jew named Būlus, who persecuted and killed Christians. In order to fully destroy Christian credibility, Būlus changed his name to Paul and pretended to convert to Christianity. He then trained three men, Nestorius, Jacob, and Malka, to claim divine knowledge and spread the resulting Nestorian, Jacobite (Monophysite), and Melkite (Syrian Orthodox) Christologies.<sup>17</sup> Yet, despite this revisionist legend, the Nestorians and Monophysites developed separately after the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which defined Christ as existing in two natures, divine and human, in one person. These two natures are not mixed, divided, confused, or separated into different persons.<sup>18</sup> The first group was the Syrian Orthodox, known as "Melkites" because of their adherence to the Council of Chalcedon. The term "Melkites" referred to Syrian and Egyptian Christians with "royal" sympathies. They held to Orthodox Christological beliefs.<sup>19</sup>

The second group was the Monophysites, geographically referred to as "Jacobites" for those in the Arabian Peninsula and "Coptics" for those in Egypt. This Syriac-speaking assembly rejected the "God-man" thinking of Chalcedon and held that the person of Christ had a "natural union" of both human and divine natures. While different in kind, the two natures were mixed together to produce one distinct nature.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the third prominent group was Nestorian, appropriately called the "Church of the East," who were condemned at Chalcedon for maintaining a strict distinction between the human and divine natures of

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<sup>16</sup> See Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 15-29. For the story of Waraqa ibn Nawfal, see *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih Al-Bukhari*, trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (Al-Medina: Islamic University, n.d.), 1:2-4. For the story of Jabr, see Muhammad ibn-Ishaq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 180.

<sup>17</sup> Mahmud Mustafa Ayoub, "Jesus the Son of God: A Study of the Terms *Ibn* and *Walad* in the Qur'an and Tafsīr Tradition," in *Muslim-Christian Encounters*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Wadī Zaydān Haddād (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 71-72.

<sup>18</sup> Adolf Martin Ritter, "Chalcedon, Council of," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 1:398-400.

<sup>19</sup> Griffith, "Melkites", 'Jacobites' and the Christological Controversies," 11-16.

<sup>20</sup> See Roberta C. Chesnut, *Three Monophysite Christologies: Severus of Antioch, Philoxenus of Mabbug, and Jacob of Sarug* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 12-14.

Christ. According to their opponents, Nestorians viewed Jesus' humanity only as a participant with the divine.<sup>21</sup>

### Possible Monophysite Influence

Trimingham explains that the Monophysites were active missionaries among the Arab tribes, which led to establishing many desert communities. Among the Arabs, there were two expressions of Monophysitism: the Severans, who followed the teachings of Severus of Antioch (d. AD 538), and the Tritheists, who adhered to the Christologies of the Cilician bishops Eugenius (fl. AD 654-657) and Conon (fl. AD 686-687).<sup>22</sup> According to Roberta Chesnut, Severan Monophysites held a particular view of the Trinity common at the time. They stressed the unity of God by declaring that the Father is the source of both the Son and Holy Spirit. Because the Father is unknowable, the mind of God had to appear as a divine messenger (Jesus) to make the Father fathomable.<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that the Monophysites were considered the purest form of monotheism by Nubians, Egyptians, and Ethiopians because of their view of Christ's nature and His relation to the Godhead. The Orthodox Christians were seen as possessing "two Christs" because of their belief in two natures.<sup>24</sup>

Remarkably, Severan Christology is not unlike the Qur'an's view of Jesus. The Qur'an declares, "The Messiah [Jesus], son of Mary, was only a messenger" (5:75; cf. v.117) and states that Jesus came to give wisdom to the people about the divine (43:63). In the Qur'an, Jesus possesses only one nature while stressing the unity of God (cf. 3:51). Unfortunately, these are mere superficial resemblances that do not fully explain the Qur'anic view of Christ. The Qur'an contends against the Severans by declaring that Jesus did not know God personally or intimately (5:116). It refutes the claim that Jesus is the "son of God" and "Lord" (9:30-31).

Rather, the Qur'an's understanding of the Trinity coincides more with tritheism than with Severan theology. It declares, "Those people who say that God is the third of three are defying [the truth]: there is only One God" (5:73). The presence of a secondary schismatic group among the Monophysites may explain this misunderstanding. In the latter part of the sixth century, some Arab Monophysites declared that the Godhead was distinct in both persons and nature. This is unlike the Severans, who believed the Godhead was distinct only in persons. Known as the "Tritheist Controversy," the dissonant sect of Monophysites gained a large following in Armenia, Alexandria, and Syria. Their Christological movement existed as late as the summer of AD 633, where records document their presence at the synod in Alexandria one year after Muhammad's death.<sup>25</sup> It is possible that Muhammad misunderstood the Christian concept of the Trinity due to the Tritheist Monophysites, who believed the Godhead had three distinct natures.

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<sup>21</sup> See Griffith, "Melkites', Jacobites' and the Christological Controversies," 10n6 and Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 109-12, 207.

<sup>22</sup> Trimingham, 163-67.

<sup>23</sup> Chesnut, 36-38.

<sup>24</sup> See W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 297.

<sup>25</sup> See Frend, 289-91, 350 and Trimingham, 183.

Griffith, on the other hand, says that the term “third of three” is actually a “Syriacism,” meaning that Muhammad employed Syriac words with an Arabic diction. The Syrian Christians merely called Christ “the treble one,” which Muhammad rejected. According to Griffith, the phrase is not a reference to tritheism at all.<sup>26</sup> While there is strong evidence that Syriac had a greater influence on the Qur’an than Muslims concede, it is important to recognize that modern translations of the Qur’an do not use this Syriac translation.<sup>27</sup> In fact, several versions specifically combat any tritheist misconceptions by employing a Trinitarian term, though it is not in the original Arabic. Ahmed Ali’s translation states, “The third of the *trinity*,” while Muhammad Farooq-i-Azam Malik writes, “One of three in a *Trinity*” (5:73).<sup>28</sup>

### Possible Nestorian Influence

Nestorian Christology reached the Arabs through evangelism by the end of the fourth century, which made the controversies of the fifth century very important to the Arabs. According to Betts, while the Monophysites virtually denied Christ’s humanity, the Nestorians focused almost entirely on Jesus’ human nature.<sup>29</sup> Martin Chemnitz’s confirms this by citing Nestorius’ belief that Jesus should rightly be called the “God-bearer” or the “receiver of God.” Nestorius believed the divine nature merely dwelt in Jesus to a fuller degree than the average saint. Thus, it is possible to speak of Jesus’ human actions, such as eating, sleeping, and dying, while at the same time speak of Christ’s divine actions, such as performing miracles and rising from the dead. Making this distinction between the two natures was condemned at Chalcedon.<sup>30</sup>

James Bethune-Baker disagrees with this assessment and contends that Nestorius was largely Orthodox. He merely feared that the human aspect of Jesus would be diminished with the Chalcedon belief in a “hypostatic union” of the two natures.<sup>31</sup> Yet, Nestorius’ work betrays this sentiment. He once wrote, “[The Holy Spirit] formed out of the Virgin a temple for God the Logos, a temple in which he dwelt,” and, “That which was formed in the womb is not in itself God. That which was created by the Spirit was not in itself God. That which was buried in the tomb was not in itself God.”<sup>32</sup> Later, Nestorius wrote, “What is conveyed to us is the birth and suffering not of the deity but of the humanity of Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Sidney H. Griffith, “‘Syriacisms’ in the Arabic Qur’an: Who were ‘Those who said that Allah is third of three’, According to al-Ma’idah 73?,” in *A Word Fitly Spoken: Studies in Medieval Exegesis of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur’an; Presented to Haggai Ben-Shammai*, ed. Meir M. Bar-Asher et al. (Jerusalem: The Ben-Zvi Institute, 2007), 83-110.

<sup>27</sup> For more about the possible Syriac influence on the Qur’an, see Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> See Ahmed Ali, trans., *Islam: The Qur’an*, rev. ed., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Sacred Writings (New York: History Book Club, 1992), 3:107 and Malik, 202; emphasis added to both translations.

<sup>29</sup> Betts, 3-5.

<sup>30</sup> Chemnitz, 112, 273-74.

<sup>31</sup> James Franklin Bethune-Baker, *Nestorius and His Teaching: A Fresh Examination of the Evidence* (1908; repr., New York: Kraus Reprint Company, 1969), 82-100, 171-73.

<sup>32</sup> Translated by Richard A. Norris Jr., ed., “Nestorius’s First Sermon Against the *Theotokos*,” in *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 125, 130.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., “Nestorius’s Second Letter to Cyril,” 137.

The Nestorian emphasis on Jesus' humanity may have influenced Muhammad's conception of Christ. Nestorius once expressed, "Without male seed, he fashioned from the Virgin a nature like Adam's (who was himself formed without male seed) and through a human being brought about the revival of the human race."<sup>34</sup> A similar comparison is found in the Qur'an when discussing the virgin birth, "In God's eyes Jesus is just like Adam: He created him from dust, said to him, 'Be,' and he was" (3:59). Likewise, Nestorius proclaimed the impossibility of the divine being crucified, "Let not the Jews glory, for they did not crucify God but a man." He also renounced the foolishness of begetting the divine, "It is impossible for God to be begotten of a man."<sup>35</sup> A similar renunciation is found in the Qur'an, "[The Jews] disbelieved and uttered a terrible slander against Mary, and said, 'We have killed the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God.' (They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them)" (4:156-57). The Qur'an states elsewhere, "[Allah] has begotten no one, and is begotten of none" (112:3, Ahmed Ali). Though the Qur'an rejects the Nestorian belief that Christ possessed a divine element, these verbal echoes between the Qur'an and Nestorius are significant because of their stress on Jesus' humanity.

### Possible Gnostic Influence

Surprisingly, few authors mention the potential influence from Gnostic Christians in Arabia. According to Trimingham, documents record Arab converts to Gnosticism as early as the second century. Gnosticism also influenced the monastic lifestyles of monks in the Arabian region, being the root of Syrian asceticism.<sup>36</sup> Though not officially part of the Christological controversies of the former schismatic groups, the Gnostic churches held to a heretical Docetic view of Christ's nature. Found in the Nag Hammadi collection of Egypt, Gnostic Gospels portray Jesus primarily as a pure spiritual being with no actual human existence. In both the Gospel of Philip and the Gospel of the Egyptians, Jesus' human flesh is a mere deception. The divine Christ never actually acquired a human nature. Especially in the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus' body is a mere shell in order to relate to His human audience.<sup>37</sup>

It is possible that Muhammad may have heard some of these "Gospel" accounts during his contacts with Egyptian Christians. Samir acknowledges the probability of Muhammad having at least some contact with Gnosticism. One connection regarding the nature of Christ appears in sura 4:171, which identifies Jesus as "a spirit from [God]." Samir notes that none of the canonical writings label Jesus as a spirit of God. Only the Gnostic writings provide that characteristic.<sup>38</sup> Of course, the Qur'anic designation "spirit" does not imply that Jesus merely masqueraded as a human. The Qur'an is clear in its belief that Jesus was mortal.

One particular parallel connecting Gnosticism to the Qur'an is also one of the most controversial. The Qur'an famously rejects the crucifixion and death of Jesus, stating that

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., "Nestorius's First Sermon Against the *Theotokos*," 124.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Chemnitz, 207.

<sup>36</sup> Trimingham, 51-52, 102, 134.

<sup>37</sup> Majella Franzmann, *Jesus in the Nag Hammadi Writings* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1996), 72-79.

<sup>38</sup> Samir, 152-56.

God made it appear as though Jesus had been crucified (4:156-58). Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb note the varying interpretations regarding this passage. The most popular Islamic explanation is that Judas Iscariot, Pontius Pilate, Simon of Cyrene, or one of the disciples took Jesus' place on the cross.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, the second-century Gnostic, Basilides, taught that the Jews mistook Simon of Cyrene for Jesus and crucified him instead.<sup>40</sup> Samir hypothesizes that the Gnostic belief in Jesus' non-crucifixion traveled to Arabia during the seventh century when Byzantines conquered Jerusalem and expelled Christian heretics.<sup>41</sup> Admittedly, however, there is little evidence to defend Samir's theory. Yet, the potential for Gnostic teachings should not be discounted. Muhammad would have likely met Gnostic Christians in his travels and may have learned about these substitution theories from heretics fleeing to Egypt.

### Possible Nazorean Influence

The final schismatic group that may have influenced Muhammad's formation of the Qur'anic Jesus appears in the early Jewish-Christian sect known as the Nazoreans. François de Blois explores the idea that the Qur'an is actually referencing this heretical sect, which was known for maintaining adherence to the Jewish law despite believing in Christ as the Messiah. He deduces this from the Qur'an's use of the word *Nasrānī* ("Nazoreans") to refer to Christians. This term was a Jewish epithet for the Jewish-Christian sect because of their continued presence in synagogue worship. Allegedly, the Ebionite heresy was first developed from this Nazorean sect. De Blois hypothesizes that a small group of Nazoreans existed in Arabia at the time of Muhammad and were responsible for perpetuating the mistaken notion that the Trinity consists of the Father, Son, and Jesus' mother, Mary. According to the Nazorean "Gospel According to the Hebrews," which was written in Hebrew, the text identifies Mary as the Holy Spirit. Thus, as the third person of the Godhead, Muhammad could have accurately renounced the belief that Mary was a god. For de Blois, the Qur'an does not view Orthodox Christianity as a threat; only the Nazoreans were cause for alarm.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the Qur'an refutes the idea that Jesus ever said, "Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God" (5:116).

In support of de Blois' theory, it is significant to note that the Ebionites existed in Syria at least until the fifth century. The Ebionites were extreme monotheists, who emphasized the Jewish law, especially ceremonial cleansing rituals similar to those in Islam.<sup>43</sup> Also, the tradition of Waraqa ibn Nawfal translating the Gospels from Hebrew is oddly coincidental to the Nazorean Gospel.<sup>44</sup> Yet, even de Blois admits that there are no records of either group having contact with Muhammad or living in Arabia. Similarly, the term "Nazoreans"

<sup>39</sup> Norman L. Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002), 67.

<sup>40</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Church History Volume One: From Christ to Pre-Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 95-96.

<sup>41</sup> Samir, 160.

<sup>42</sup> François de Blois, "Nasrānī (Ναζωραῖος) and Ḥanīf (ἑθνητός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65, no. 1 (2002): 2-26.

<sup>43</sup> Helmut Merkel, "Ebionites," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 2:8-9.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Bukhari, 1:2-4.



is the Arabic designation for Christians and existed prior to Islam's formation.<sup>45</sup> At this point, de Blois' thesis begins to lose validity. Nevertheless, heresiographers cannot dismiss the similarities between the Qur'an's incorrect concept of the Trinity and the Nazorean's deification of Mary.

### Possible Monastic Influence

In focusing on schismatic groups in seventh-century Arabia, one monastic story is particularly important. According to Muhammad's eighth-century biography, the *Sīrat*, by hagiographer Muhammad ibn Ishāq, Christian monk Sergius-Bahira recognized a prophetic mark on Muhammad's body and related the foretelling of his ascendancy from earlier Scriptures. This short story involving Bahira was likely invented by Muslims to answer the Christian charge that Muhammad was unannounced and, thus, a false prophet. The apologetic legend was designed to give a Christian approval of Muhammad's prophethood.<sup>46</sup>

Yet, the legend of Muhammad's encounter with Bahira is also found in both Syrian and Arab Christian circles during the ninth century. Barbara Roggema clarifies that the Christian version tells the legend differently. Both Monophysite and Nestorian Christians had a copy of the story, which seeks to demonstrate that Bahira was the actual author of the Qur'an. One purpose of containing such a legend was to demonstrate that the Qur'an originated from Christianity. Bahira claims that Muhammad had trouble differentiating between the polytheists and the Christians. In sura 4:157, Bahira did not intend to say that Jesus never died on the cross. Instead, he meant only that Jesus did not die in His divine nature.<sup>47</sup>

As Griffith explains, the Christian version of the legend presents Islam as a mistaken form of Christianity. Bahira is presented as a fugitive monk from the Nestorian tradition, who attempted to convert the Arab polytheists by contextualizing Christianity for Arab culture. Originally, the Qur'an contained a pure gospel message prior to Jewish converts distorting the record and making Islam what it is known today. Bahira even gave himself the name "Nestorius," in order to promote Nestorian Christology. This may account for another Muslim legend of Muhammad meeting a monk on his way to Syria named *Nasṭūr* (Nestorius?), who also declared Muhammad's future prophethood. According to Griffith, the legend of Bahira likely originated from Monophysite Christians to blame Nestorians for the rise of Islam. Griffith summarizes the legend, "[It] is clearly a literary attempt, knowingly to depict Islam as a degraded and simplified form of Christianity, which was further distorted by the Jews."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> de Blois, 1-2, 12. See also, Bell, 149.

<sup>46</sup> See Goddard, 19-20, Sidney H. Griffith, "Muhammad and the Monk Bahirā: Reflections on a Syriac and Arabic Text from Early Abbasid Times," *Oriens Christianus* 79 (1995): 148, 153, Sahas, 73, 73n5, and Barbara Roggema, "A Christian Reading of the Qur'an: The Legend of Sergius-Bahirā and Its Use of Qur'an and Sira," in *Syrian Christians Under Islam: The First Thousand Years*, ed. David Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 57.

<sup>47</sup> Roggema, 57-70.

<sup>48</sup> Griffith, "Muhammad and the Monk Bahirā," 148-65.

Interestingly, John of Damascus details a polemic against Muslims by referring to an Arian monk as the teacher of Muhammad. In his eighth century work, *De Haeresibus*, John concludes that Islam is a form of Christian heresy. One codex of his book describes John's belief that Jews, Christians, Arians, and Nestorians were the cause behind Muhammad's religion. From the Arians, Muhammad learned that Jesus was created and not eternal. From the Nestorians, Muhammad learned to place a stress on Christ's humanity. The monk Bahira, according to John, was an Arian who misled the Arab people.<sup>49</sup> Muhammad's Arian tendencies is confirmed by the legend when Bahira says, "[Muhammad's] understanding could not encompass it, and the faith of Arius ... became fixed in his thinking, who had said, 'I think that the messiah is the Word of God and the son of God, but he was created.'"<sup>50</sup>

Betts explains that recent theories into the legend suggest that the monk actually met Muhammad as an adult and became the dominant source of his Christological teachings.<sup>51</sup> However, the value of this medieval legend is not in its historicity. It is likely that neither the Islamic nor Christian version truly took place. However, the legend's importance to the present study is found in early Christian-Muslim dialogue. All three Christian communities, Syrian Orthodox, Monophysite, and Nestorian, believed that schismatic heresies were responsible for the formation of the Qur'anic Jesus. Griffith states, "There is a perceptible interest on the author's part to suggest that Islam was inspired in its origins from within the 'Nestorian' community, albeit at the hands of a monk whom the 'Nestorians' themselves had repudiated."<sup>52</sup> Interestingly, the Qur'an quotes Muhammad's skeptics who allude to him receiving personal instructions from an outsider, "They say, 'It is just ancient fables [apocryphal legends?], which he has had written down: they are dictated to him morning and evening'" (25:5).

## Conclusion

In the end, the presence of schismatic Christian groups in Arabia must be treated as probable influences on Muhammad's concept of Christ. It is possible that the Qur'an's stress on divine unity and misunderstanding about tritheism developed from Muhammad's contact with Monophysite Christians. It is equally possible that Muhammad learned to stress Jesus' humanity from the Nestorian tradition. From Gnostic influence, Muhammad may have learned about the substitution legend surrounding Jesus' crucifixion. From the Nazoreans, Muhammad may have incorrectly learned that Mary is part of the Christian Trinity. Finally, tales about an erring monk guiding Muhammad give credence to the notion that dissonant groups were at least involved, if not directly responsible, for Muhammad's Christology.

However, it would be historically unwise to suggest that schismatic Christians were the dominant influence behind the formation of Islam. While there are similarities, the Qur'an does not conform to any one Christology. It appears that Muhammad developed his own personalized version of Jesus. Nevertheless, it would be equally unwise to suggest that these schismatic groups did not, in some fashion, influence Muhammad's convictions on proper religion. If nothing else, they demonstrated to him the factionalism present in Christianity.

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<sup>49</sup> Sahas, 59, 67-69, 73-74, 81.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Griffith, "Muhammad and the Monk Bahira," 168.

<sup>51</sup> Betts, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Griffith, "Muhammad and the Monk Bahira," 159.

At best, history can identify striking resemblances between Muhammad's view of Jesus and the Christology of certain schismatic groups. At worst, Muhammad was completely ignorant of the Christological controversies and merely rejected what he believed was true of all Christians. In either case, it is apparent that Muhammad formulated much of his beliefs about Jesus from what was preached in Arabia. To further explore outside influences on Muhammad, Christoph Luxenberg's *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran* and Gabriel Reynolds' *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* provide excellent studies regarding Muhammad's cultural and religious environment.



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